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Stevie Smith and Her Dancing Girls

> You are an angel to write as you do about my poems, I can't tell you how it cheers me up because I am never never very certain about them, the inspiration or whatever it is comes in such a vague and muddled way, and I am not sure that I don't sometimes get the wrong poems into print.

So wrote Stevie Smith to her friend Rachel Marshall on 1 January 1942 (Smith 1981: 280).[1] It is striking that a poet whose work has received such mixed responses, whose admirers will sometimes wince at her whimsy and whose detractors are not immune to being charmed and impressed, was often herself unsure as to what constituted the strengths and weaknesses of her work. 'I wish there was some litmus paper test you could have for your poems, blue for bad and pink for good', Smith confessed to the novelist Rosamund Lehmann in 1938, associating pink results with 'the acid ones that are best' (Smith 1981: 266). But can one judge empirically between poetic success and failure, and is it really possible to isolate Smith poems that hit the spot by means of an acidic sharpness, especially given that tonal shifts and compounds are integral to her poetic accomplishment? One might prize the acerbic in a particular composition and yet be unable to prise it apart from the wry, the melancholy, the perverse. Smith's anxiety as to what distinguishes the felicitous from the flawed is often her readers' dilemma also.

The appearance in 2015 of *The Collected Poems and Drawings of Stevie Smith,* edited by Will May, has provided a new opportunity to consider the oeuvre, and in particular to

[1] Rachel Marshall was a music, speech and drama teacher in Cambridge and advised Smith about her delivery for radio broadcasts (Spalding 1988: 140, 231).

reappraise, or in some cases appraise for the first time, poems that have previously been at the margins of her readers' awareness. In his introduction to the volume, May reflects on how 'Smith agonised over which poems and drawings to include in individual books or, more accurately, which to omit from them' (Smith 2015: xxxviii), and the omissions are usefully gathered together in two appendices, the first of uncollected and the second of unpublished poems. Given Smith's uncertainty about what should and should not be included in volume publications, her haphazard working methods and her capacity to lose track of things, one should not consider the 'appended' poems as necessarily ancillary to those which appeared in book form in Smith's lifetime or in the posthumous *Collected* and *Selected* editions of the 1970s, assembled when the complete body of written work was not yet apparent (Smith 1975; Smith 1978). One should remain open to the possibility that some of her most effective pieces may be found in the 'back pages' of *The Collected Poems and Drawings*. A notable case in point is 'The Ballet of the Twelve Dancing Princesses', which first came to light in *Me Again: The Uncollected Writings of Stevie Smith* (1981), where it is attributed to a typescript, dated June 1939, in the possession of Kitty Hermges.[2] The poem was found among the papers of Hermges' mother, Rachel Marshall—the very woman to whom Smith confided 'I am not sure that I don't sometimes get the wrong poems into print'. There is a poignant irony in the fact that Smith offered to Marshall both the revelation of uncertainty about the quality of her work and a poem that she failed to see into print but that is, arguably, one of her finest compositions, for 'The Ballet of the Twelve Dancing Princesses' is a complex, enigmatic, playful, sinister and psychologically suggestive poem that invites sustained consideration:

The Ballet of the Twelve Dancing Princesses

[2] See 'Acknowledgments and Bibliographical Note' in Smith 1981: n.pag. 'The Ballet of the Twelve Dancing Princesses' was not included in Smith 1983, which contains other works that were first published in Smith 1981. The poem was, however, one of thirteen chosen to represent Smith in Dowson 1996: 145-6.

Hayes Court, June 1939

The schoolgirls dance on the cold grass
The ballet of the twelve dancing princesses
And the shadows pass

Over their cold feet
Above in the cold summer sky the clouds mass

The icy wind blows across the laurel bushes
The sky is hard blue and gray where a cloud rushes
The sky is icy blue it is like the night blue where a star pushes.

But it is not night
It is daytime on an English lawn.
The scholars dance. The weather is as fresh as dawn.
Dawn and night are the webs of this summer's day
Dawn and night the tempo of the children's play.

Who taught the scholars? Who informed the dance?
Who taught them so innocent to advance
So far in a peculiar study? They seem to be in a trance.

It is a trance in which the cold innocent feet pass
To and fro in a hinted meaning over the grass

The meaning is not more ominous and frivolous than the clouds
that mass.

There is nothing to my thought more beautiful at this moment
Than a vision of innocence that is bound to do something
equivocal
I sense something equivocal beneath the veneer of an innocent
spent
Tale and in the trumpet sound of the icy storm overhead there is
evocable
The advance of innocence against a mutation that is irrevocable
Only in the imagination of that issue joined for a split second is
the idea beautiful.
(Smith 1981: 235; Smith 2015: 705-6)

First, the provenance and social context of the poem require a gloss. 'The Ballet of the Twelve Dancing Princesses' is subtitled 'Hayes Court, June 1939' and was written to commemorate the dance performance of a group of pupils in the gardens of that boarding school house for girls in Kent. As Roma Goyder's history of the school, *Hayseed to Harvest: Memories of Katherine Cox and Hayes Court School* (1985) (which reproduces the text of Smith's poem on p. 89) reveals, Hayes Court School (1919-39) was a progressive educational establishment with some avant-garde and eccentric leanings, and with a strong emphasis on artistic and literary pursuits. Virginia Woolf and Roger Fry both visited the school to give talks, and Lascelles Abercrombie came to read his poems (Goyder 1985: 79-82).[3] Hardly less

[3] For an account of Woolf's talk at Hayes Court, see also Lee 1997: 563-4.

distinguished were those who agreed to lend a hand to the school's theatrical performances: Alec Guinness was persuaded to direct, and his wife Merula to design, a production of *The Merchant of Venice,* and John Gielgud turned up to offer advice on and participate in an emotional read-through of a sixth form production of *Uncle Vanya* (Goyder 1985: 84-6).[4] But 'the highlight of the year' (Pamela Oakley, cited in Goyder 1985: 87) was widely thought to be the summer ballet—something of a society event, in which the dancers wore costumes commissioned from noted designers, and which took place, in front of assembled friends and family members, 'on one of the lawns with a backdrop of handsome trees and shrubs (mostly rhododendrons) which made splendid stage wings' (Yvonne de Méric, cited in Goyder 1985: 86). (The undated photographs in the appendix to this article, reproduced from Goyder's book, capture, respectively, a scene from an unidentified ballet at Hayes Court and the audience gathered for one of these notable performances.) Frustratingly, although there are accounts of many of the ballet productions in the school gazette, there was no edition of *The Hayseed* in 1939, so it is possible that Smith's poem is the only extant 'record' of the event. It seems clear that she attended the 1939 production as a friend of Rachel Marshall, who was the sister of the school's founder and headmistress, Katherine Cox, and a diary entry by one Sally Sidgwick notes that 'Stevie Smith sent criticism of the Ballet in the form of an elaborate poem' (cited in Goyder 1985: 88), which leads one to wonder if it was read and discussed at the school. But this thought is as elusive of certainty as so much in the composition itself.[5]

One of the poem's many mysteries is the nature of the girls' style of dancing. Smith's preoccupation in the poem with the tension between innocence and knowledge may lead one to wonder if a combination of naïvety and suggestiveness informed the ballet performance

[4] See also Kerr 2002: 108-9 on Hayes Court as 'a society school' and on a 'school production of *The Merchant of Venice*, directed by the young Alec Guinness'.

[5] Rachel's daughter Kitty Hermges (née Marshall), who went on to become a documentary film-maker, and who brought the poem to light after Smith's and her own mother's deaths, was herself a pupil at Hayes Court School from 1926 to 1932.

she witnessed. Goyder's history of Hayes Court School makes it clear that a 'modern and go-ahead' style was preferred for the annual ballet (Yvonne de Méric, cited in Goyder 1985: 87), and this tendency is corroborated by former pupil Barbara Walker's recollection of an occasion 'when some visiting dancers came onto the summer lawn to display eurythmics [sic], in revealing draperies', which charmed many of the girls, though it apparently shocked one teacher (Goyder 1985: 9). In addition to the school's exposure to 'eurhythmics' ('a system of rhythmical bodily movements, especially dancing exercises, with musical accompaniment, frequently used for educational purposes': *OED*), it is also possible, as Judith Woolf has suggested, that the dancer, choreographer and teacher Margaret Morris's promotion of dance as exercise, much in vogue in the 1920s and 1930s, may have had an influence on the style of ballet Smith's poem describes; in particular, the attention Smith draws to the 'cold feet' of the dancers might imply that they were performing barefoot on the grass, in accordance with the Isadora Duncan technique so influentially championed by Morris. Pathé newsreel footage of the Margaret Morris Movement in the late 1930s (viewable online) gives hints of the kind of trance-like dancing on lawns which may have informed the 'peculiar study' of the Hayes Court ballerinas.[6]

If the girls' performance generated an ambiguous frisson, this would have emerged not merely from the dancing style but from the story they enacted, for the plot their movements were portraying is that of a popular fairy tale which allegorizes both the development and the control of sexual knowledge in young girls. The tale is known both as 'The Twelve Dancing Princesses' and 'The Worn-Out Dancing Shoes' and has several narrative variants; the version published in 1812 by The Brothers Grimm (to whose works Smith was repeatedly drawn) tells of the subterfuge activities of twelve princesses who dress

[6] I am grateful to Dr Judith Woolf (University of York) for her thoughts, in correspondence and conversation, on the girls' manner of dancing and for alerting me to the works of Goyder and Kerr referenced in this article.

up in their finery every night and escape through a trapdoor in their communal bedroom to travel across an enchanted underworld and cross a lake to reach a castle in which they dance with princes till their shoes are worn out; one night, they are tracked and observed by an unseen man, an old soldier, draped in a cloak that renders him invisible, and his prize for explaining the mystery of the worn shoes to their father, the king, is the bride of his choice from among the girls and the inheritance of the kingdom (Grimm: 362-9).[7] The poem describes none of this narrative detail and yet seems to proceed on the assumption that the tale will be familiar and borne in mind.[8] Knowing the plot leads one to imagine, for example, that the all-girl ensemble might well have comprised both princesses keen to explore their secret desires by night and the female 'princes' with whom they were partnered for those amatory, enchanted dances; this may well have made the performance especially piquant and curious for Smith. The question of how ingenuous and how knowing the schoolgirls were as they enacted these roles clearly interests her, and in this respect 'The Ballet of the Twelve Dancing Princesses' criss-crosses the same ground as that explored in *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936) when Smith (thinly disguised as Pompey Casmilus) recalls being 'out to learn' and yet innocent about sexual behaviour in her adolescence (Smith 1980: 126) and how this came to light, slant-wise, in a school production of Euripides' *Bacchae*, which 'made a very great impression' (115) on Smith and in which, as a messenger, she gave a speech promoting the Dionysian spirit and the pleasures of the senses (115-6).

Many Stevie Smith poems prompt the reader to consider the 'equivocal' relationship between innocence and awareness, and in particular between a precarious childish naïvety and incipient or tacit adult perception; 'The Ballet of the Twelve Dancing Princesses' is unusually self-reflexive in exploring this matter. And yet it fights shy of being explicit: the

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[7] On the importance of the Brothers Grimm to Smith's creative imagination, see Spalding 1988: 21, 90-91; Orr 1966: 226; Williams 1991: 42.

[8] For a markedly different poetic response to the legend, see Sexton 2001: 87-92.

wisdom the schoolgirls are on the edge of acquiring is not clearly described in the poem. Smith writes of a 'hinted meaning', a 'vision', an 'idea', an 'issue' emerging from the implications of the children's dance, but for all the poem's moments of overt conceptuality, for all its gestures towards philosophical extrapolation, the nature of the poet's thinking remains suggestively imprecise. Smith is in the position of the man in the invisible cloak in the Brothers Grimm tale: unseen, she observes the girls as they go through the motions of a predestined narrative, and in doing so she seems to divine the mystery of their conduct in the psychological underworld of the dance, while the children themselves, lost in a trance, remain oblivious both to the watcher and to the meaning of their movements. (It is as if, hypnotized by their choreographed motions, the schoolgirls are replicating the enchanted condition of the somnambulant princesses whose story their footsteps trace.) But the poem itself, although it seems to come from a position of 'wisdom', is also, in its recessive semantic ambiguities, on the side of the unknowable. Smith both coolly inspects and oddly parallels the schoolgirls' performance: they are poised on the brink of an awareness which has not yet come to pass; she is poised on the brink of revelations and clarifications which remain veiled by the poem's manifold ambiguities.

This is a poem with many an interpretative and psychoanalytical challenge. The conundrums and double-meanings it presents are so numerous that it might be helpful to itemize some of them in a critical inventory:

(1) Shifting Shadows

What do the 'shadows' that 'pass / Over' the 'cold feet' of the dancing schoolgirls represent (ll. 3-4)? It could be simply that the girls are crossing each other's shadows as they move about on the grass, or the passing clouds could be darkening the lawn, but the physical gestures have a metaphysical feel to them, and one wonders about the shadowy implications of the story being given dramatic form. Proverbially, to get cold feet is to retreat from

something to which one is nonetheless attracted; is this what is happening in the subconscious of the schoolgirls as they shrink from the shady meanings they dance towards?

(2) Unsteady Innocence

Having been passed over by shadows, those 'cold innocent feet' themselves 'pass / To and fro in a hinted meaning over the grass' (ll. 17-18). Smith's phrasing dances around the idea of passing innocence, and as it does so her imagery calls to mind the commonplace Biblical adage that 'all flesh is grass' (Isaiah 40:6; 1 Peter 1:24)—a phrase which itself hides its 'hinted meaning' within an enigmatic metaphor. (Smith's miniature poem 'All things pass / Love and mankind is grass.' (Smith 2015: 53) in the 1937 volume *A Good Time Was Had by All* shows evidence of her attraction to the adage.) The idea of lost or imperilled innocence returns near the poem's end when Smith declares 'There is nothing to my thought' (and does Smith mean by this 'in the thought I am having' or 'to my way of thinking'?) 'more beautiful at this moment / Than a vision of innocence that is bound to do something equivocal' (ll. 20-21). It is hard to say where the savouring of a 'vision of innocence' before something 'equivocal' occurs ends and the relishing of the 'equivocal' gesture to come begins. Smith's phrasing itself equivocates, and expressively so. The same may be said of the sentence that follows: 'I sense something equivocal beneath the veneer of an innocent spent / Tale' (ll. 22-23). This is riddling because 'innocent spent / Tale' is itself an 'equivocal' phrase, seeming at once to describe a harmless, outmoded fairy story and to remind us that the folk legend tells of spent innocence: although the princesses retain a daytime veneer of being ingénues, their subterfuge and subterranean nocturnal trysts invite a different reading. And by shadowing the princesses' night-time activities, the schoolgirls are rehearsing for a time when their own innocence will give way to knowledge; Judith Woolf has suggested that Smith's poem is attuned to 'the fact that the dancers will soon emerge from adolescence, still seen in the 1930s as a kind of chrysalis state from which upper class boarding-school girls would "come

out" (ironic phrase) to enter the marriage market as debutantes. The dancers are touching and beautiful because they will change so completely and so soon'.[9]

(3) 'Enchanted Stasis'

Perhaps the most baffling part of the poem is the incantatory couplet that reads 'Dawn and night are the webs of this summer's day / Dawn and night the tempo of the children's play' (ll. 12-13). In part, this seems to be an extension of Smith's responsiveness to the odd climatic atmosphere, with the air feeling 'fresh as dawn' while the sky possesses a 'night blue' quality. But there may also be a reference to the contents of the folktale here: does the spellbound reiteration convey the sense that the dancing girls are unconsciously re-enacting the ritualized motions of the princesses who shuttle back and forth between their night-time fantasy lives and the ostensibly 'innocent' condition to which they revert each dawn, as if each condition in turn is a trap, or 'web', towards which the princesses alternately move, like automata fulfilling a predestined and incessantly recurring narrative? Hermione Lee has noted the quality of 'enchanted stasis' that defines some of Smith's rhymed line endings, and the phrase seems apt here for characterizing the nature of both the poetic effect and the condition the lines describe (Smith 1983: 19).[10]

(4) Shady Instructions

'Who taught the scholars? Who informed the dance?' (l. 14) asks Smith, but whether the questions are meant to convey ruminative detachment, (mock-?) indignation ('who on earth…?') or knowing amusement is impossible to tell. One wonders if there is an in-joke for Rachel Marshall here, as the identity, and perhaps even the choreographic methods, of the ballet instructor may have been known to them both. But the identity-puzzle is not confined

[9] Email to author, 29 July 2016.

[10] Compare Bedient 1974: 150 on how, in Smith's poetic responses to fables, 'cleverness and innocence, narrative and rapt stasis, are curiously and winningly combined'.

to the literal: as ‘scholars’, teenage girls can learn lessons from many sources. The possibility that some of their education has been non-curricular may run beneath the speculation ‘Who taught them so innocent to advance / So far in a peculiar study?’ (ll. 15-16). In this question and in the reference later in the poem to ‘The advance of innocence against a mutation that is irrevocable’ (l. 24), Smith plays with the conventional idea of an advance of knowledge and leaves it deliciously unclear whether the innocence of the children is endangered by what the dance represents or, conversely, seems almost to grow as it holds out against a reciprocally burgeoning threat of which it remains unaware. The ‘peculiar’ thing about the form of ‘study’ in which the ballerinas are engaged is that, although they have been ‘taught’ something, they may nonetheless remain oblivious to the full implications of their lesson.

(5) Ominous Frivolity

‘The meaning’ of the schoolgirls’ dance for Smith ‘is not more ominous and frivolous than the clouds that mass’ (l. 19). The minor quirk of replacing the expected conjunction ‘or’ with ‘and’, as if to insist that gravity and levity come as a pair, is an entirely characteristic gesture from a writer whose ‘flippant and frivolous mind’, as she styles it in *Novel on Yellow Paper* (Smith 1980: 180), is so intrinsically bound to a sense of the ominous and the morbid as to seem at times almost a manic defence against it. The weather of this poem imparts an oppressive, even an eerie quality to the dance, but clouds are fleeting, shifting things, easily dispersed (‘frivolous’ is from ‘friare’, ‘to break apart’), and Smith knows that the implications of what she describes can be seen, according to one’s perspective, as either gravely momentous or of little importance—or perhaps both at once: ‘ominous *and* frivolous’. This two-toned attitude towards the ‘meaning’ of her work, this unresolved negotiation between the serious and the insouciant, is one of the most recognizable hallmarks of Smith’s style.

(6) Strange Evocations

There is something weird and hermetic about Smith's suggestion that 'in the trumpet sound of the icy storm overhead there is evocable / The advance of innocence against a mutation that is irrevocable' (ll. 23-24). What are we to make of 'evocable', the poem's oddest word? It can be found in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (defined as 'that may be called forth'), yet there are no examples of usage adduced. To evoke is not simply 'to call (a feeling, faculty, manifestation, etc.) into being or activity', or 'to call up (a memory) from the past', but also 'to summon up (spirits, etc.) by the use of magic charms'; the word is employed 'in various associations, with more or less obvious allusion to magical operations' (*OED*). The adjective 'evocable', through its very unfamiliarity in our language, augments the sense of strangeness that the verb from which it derives conveys. An air of sorcery hangs over Smith's *evocative* poem, with its description of entranced children unconsciously summoning the hidden implications of a supernatural tale. It is part of the danger of the dance that whatever powers it evokes in the schoolgirls cannot be revoked.

(7) An Uncertain 'Issue'

The poem ends not in clarification but in intensified mystery: 'Only in the imagination of that issue joined for a split second is the idea beautiful' (l. 25). If the 'idea' refers to 'the advance of innocence against a mutation that is irrevocable', described in the poem's preceding line, what, then, is the 'issue'? And to what is it momentarily connected? (The hunt for clarity is liable to be further scrambled by Smith's antic gaming with 'joined' and 'split'.) In a general sense, the poem's final line is amenable to paraphrase: 'Only by imagining the moment at which two ideas issuing from the dance—innocence and the loss of innocence—are held in precarious balance is there something beautiful to apprehend'. But it is in the spirit of the poem for Smith's thinking to issue forth in elusive phrasing that resists the effort of secure critical explication which it nonetheless provokes.

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Even the extensive inventory of critical quandaries offered above is not adequate to the full complexity of 'The Ballet of the Twelve Dancing Princesses', for there is another possible field of reference for some of the poem's imagery. It is a moot point whether Smith records 'June 1939' in the subtitle simply to mark the occasion of the performance or whether the date should alert one to other difficult lessons that were in the offing at that time. Responsive to the latter idea, Will May has suggested that the poem is attuned to its precarious historical moment. In a short, introductory note to a reprinting of 'The Ballet of the Twelve Dancing Princesses' in the October 2015 edition of *Harper's Bazaar* (a note which sheds further light on the poem's publication history by revealing that the fiction editor George Davis had bought the rights for Smith's poem 76 years earlier but left the staff of the magazine before it could be published), May notes that the schoolgirls'

> ballet performance promises an innocent diversion, but the certainty of war hangs heavy in the air. The girls' discipline suddenly looks ominous to the poet, who half-rhymes 'beautiful' with 'equivocal'. The perfection of their dance condemns art to a discipline; the ensemble of their bodies suggests an army. It is a poem of only 'hinted meaning', but this gathers pace in the final stanza like glowering clouds. A few months later, the school was evacuated.
>
> (May 2015: 202)

Following this suggestion, one might read Smith's choice of the verb 'advance' (used twice in the poem) as an implication that the schoolgirls' dance enacts an unconscious parody of a military 'advance', while the shadows, the icy wind, the massing clouds, the trumpeting storm and the encroaching night against which the daytime 'English lawn' holds out could be read as harbingers of war, with all of the 'irrevocable', innocence-shattering 'mutation' that the gathering of destructive forces in the air will bring. This line of reading accords with terminology employed by Smith in an article entitled 'Mosaic', published in *Eve's Journal* in

March 1939: here, anticipating the war, Smith writes that ‘already upon my eyes there is darkness and a great wind blowing over dead battlefields’, and she responds to the current political debates and discussions in Britain concerning the mounting international crisis as so many ‘frivolous, pompous questions and answers’, as ‘irrelevant comments’ which ‘fly backwards and forwards; they are like dead leaves before a wind that is blowing up storm-strong’ (Smith 1981: 106); Smith’s choice of the adjective ‘frivolous’ in her article is noteworthy, given its reappearance, in conjunction with the ‘ominous’, in the poem she wrote some three months later.

Hayes Court itself was certainly sensitized to the coming storm: Goyder’s history of the school makes it clear that ‘the fear of war was being taken seriously in that last term’, and that, as Sally Sidgwick put it, ‘a constant exchange’ was taking place at that time among staff and senior pupils ‘over what was right or wrong to do in particular circumstances’, an exchange that ‘arose in part because of a common fear and uncertainty about the future’ (Goyder 1985: 93). Inevitably, being so close to London, from which children were being evacuated en masse in the summer of 1939, Hayes Court was forced to close. Seen in retrospect, the ballet was thus, in a sense, the school’s swansong performance. These contextual details, in combination with the textual hints, make a case for reading the poem as, at least in part, an expression of pre-war tensions and anxieties. However, the further one attempts to run with this line of thought, the harder it becomes to determine where grim worldly tidings end and Grimm otherworldly tidings begin. These two dimensions of reading may be ghosting each other, or the phantom of war may be a projection on the reader’s part, unintended by Smith. The impulse to read the poem as a barometer of an impending storm that would soon be sweeping across the lawns of England (and beyond) is tempting, and potentially tenable, but it might be held in check by the recognition that, in general, Smith’s imaginative writing was, as Ian Hamilton put it, ‘fairly unresponsive to upheavals in the

world at large' (Hamilton 2002: 138). Indeed, in a contemporaneous short story, 'Surrounded by Children', Smith describes 'a pleasant English summer's day' in Kensington Gardens and Hyde Park in 1939, in the heart of the capital, with children romping around on the grass with 'no care at all', but in this case, despite the location and the moment of composition, Smith's perspective is entirely oblivious to the looming war (Smith 1981: 26-7). Of course, to observe this is not in itself to refute, or even necessarily diminish, the idea that 'The Ballet of the Twelve Dancing Princesses' is marked by pre-war omens, but it does highlight the peculiar degree of difficulty in determining the extent of cultural resonance in Smith's work.

But perhaps the most uncertain and delicate of all the critical considerations her poem inspires relates to the movements of the poetic line, to the patterns, and the disruptions to the patterns, of rhyme and rhythm; the implications of such effects are perhaps even more elusive of accurate summary than any ambiguous wording or imagery. The heart of the dilemma here may lie in choosing between deliberation and improvisation. Hermione Lee makes a strong case for the technical merits of Smith's work and encourages us to presume calculation in the seemingly capricious. She writes of Smith's 'very sophisticated and exact sense of line', and claims that 'the long conversational line of many of the poems […] is not as casual as it looks' (Smith 1983: 19). This claim accords with Smith's own reflections on her craft in interview: 'I can't work without this sense of rhythm and metre and sometimes it will not go right. It has to be worked at and worked at. It may take years' (Orr 1966: 230). Despite the labour she describes, the sense of spontaneity in Smith's utterance often gives her poetry the air not so much of being 'worked at' as of being worked out on the jot:

> The sky is icy blue it is like the night blue where a star pushes.
> But it is not night
> It is daytime on an English lawn. (ll. 8-10)

It is hard to say whether Smith here strategically creates one impression for the reader, only to 'correct' them with the next, or is in the process of extemporizing her way towards exactitude. Variable line-lengths and unexpected stanza breaks accentuate the effect of a poet pacing her thoughts aloud and placing them on the page in a manner that hovers uncertainly between the carefully measured and the carefree. The oscillation between accurate and absent punctuation also generates uncertainty; is the omission of full stops or commas where one expects them artfully impressionistic or distractingly flawed? In *Novel on Yellow Paper* Smith champions the disruption of grammatical conventions as a means of keeping faithful to an improvised idiom: 'Oh talking voice that is so sweet, how hold you alive in captivity, how point you with commas, semi-colons, dashes, pauses and paragraphs?' (Smith 1980: 39). Her cry of liberation implies that a higher form of fluency may be achieved by surmounting the impedimenta of normative punctuation and presentation, and in some respects Smith's voice feels expressively emancipated on the page in accord with this ideal, but the impression of freed utterance is hard to reconcile with the sense that unintended confusion can also arise from the collapse of familiar boundaries and sign-posts between phrases, and it is hard altogether to dispel one's misgiving that Smith is haphazard and inconsistent in how she 'points' her writing.

As for rhyme, this, Lee suggests, 'is her most pronounced device for controlling the line, her favourite kind of joke, and one of her most cunning skills' (Smith 1983: 21). For Lee, 'the rhymes are often purposely unpoetical', and thereby oddly funny, but 'this flat-footed comical perversity, which manages to combine despair and high spirits in a quizzical, shrugging way, frequently shades into something sinister, delicate or haunting', and this is true even, or especially, where rhyme falters, for often it is 'elegant, mournful half-rhymes', Lee observes, that are among Smith's most expressive effects (21). In the case of 'The Ballet of the Twelve Dancing Princesses', where the comic spirit has dwindled to the ghostly shadow of a wry smile (hard to detect, but impossible to dismiss), a sense of the 'sinister,

delicate or haunting' derives in part from the making and unmaking of patterns through rhyme and broken rhyme—as when 'grass' and 'pass' modulate into 'mass', which happens twice in the poem (ll. 1-5, 17-19), or 'rushes' comes between 'bushes' and 'pushes' (ll. 6-8), or 'moment' hangs in suspended relation to 'innocent' and 'spent' (ll. 20-22), or 'equivocal' hovers close to 'evocable' which itself leans towards, yet holds itself away from, 'irrevocable', before this in turn grazes the far margin of the poem's final word: 'beautiful' (ll. 21-25). The effects achieved through the equivocations of partial rhymes, especially when set against the chiming of full rhyming, are as tricky to characterize as anything else in Smith's elegant but eccentric poem. This seems apt: the uncertain interplay between a sense of strategic design in Smith's rhyme 'scheme' and a feeling of serendipitous aural correspondences somehow befits the poem's engagement with an uncertainly choreographed dance concerning unaccountable experiences.

'The icy wind blows across the laurel bushes', Smith observes, in what may be a self-conscious reference to something frosty in the nature of her composition: if the poet earns her proverbial laurels, she does so by observing her subjects with cool detachment, even a touch of asperity, and by exposing her summer poem not merely to the menace of an impending meteorological and metaphorical storm but also to the breeze of what Philip Larkin once termed 'her wintry cadences' (Larkin 2001: 265). As the dancers move their 'cold feet' across the grass, so there is a correspondingly chilly quality to the way in which Smith measures out her response across the poem's metrical feet. That 'The Ballet of the Twelve Dancing Princesses' is also fleet of foot is chastening for the reader who feels compelled to offer an extensive exposition of the critical quandaries it presents. It is hard to escape a sense of ironic misalignment between a 'foot-on-the-ground' approach that attempts to stake out meaning, a tendency mocked by Smith in *Novel on Yellow Paper*, and the poem's 'foot-off-the-ground' spirit that allows her to skim playfully between interpretative possibilities, to skip deftly through patterns of rhyming that are at once intricate and loose, and to run her

metrical feet lightly and with ease along her poetic lines (Smith 1980: 38-9); any attempt to chart the numerous effects her methods generate will inevitably make the critic's motions appear plodding, pedantic and pedestrian by contrast. Smith's insistence, in the same novel, that, in the process of composition, 'the thoughts come and go and sometimes they do not quite come and I do not pursue them to embarrass them with formality' (38) chastens the reader who risks trying to complete, on the artist's behalf, the articulation of thoughts that depend for their effectiveness on remaining sketchy. The 'scholars' on the grass at Hayes Court, who are being coaxed through movements without properly understanding the meaning, find an awkward analogy in scholars of another kind: those enchanted and bemused readers who sense themselves to be caught up in an interpretative dance, embarrassed both by the prospect of missing any of the poet's tricks on the page and by the misgiving that their painstaking explanations and even their interpretative pirouettes are no more than the clumsy, misplaced, amateurish moves that Smith has either craftily engineered or indifferently engendered, and that all the while the floundering, faltering critic is being coolly observed and mocked by the spirit of mischief that is the presiding genius of the poet's work.

Since the critical endeavour is fraught with uncertainty, even with a degree of self-conscious anxiety, how can one determine the right level of interpretative pressure to bear on a particular poem, and on what criteria should one judge Smith's 'success' as a writer? An anonymous review in the *Times Literary Supplement* on 14 July 1972 suggested that

> One often wants not to criticize Stevie Smith's poems, merely to accept them in the spirit or mood they create. They arouse not so much sympathy as a feeling of agreeable association; not so much the sense that one is reading good poems or bad poems but rather that one is experiencing a species of writing so uniquely the distillation of one set of circumstances as to fall outside all literary categories. (cited in Gordon 1983: 232)

Certainly, many of Smith's poems, especially the slighter, funnier pieces, are liable to provoke a response in which a wariness regarding qualitative judgment is alleviated through recourse to charmed indulgence. Yet to sidestep the dilemma (so vexing to Smith herself) of distinguishing between 'good poems' and 'bad poems' is to do the work a disservice. Larkin once suggested that

> her successes are not full-scale four-square poems that can be anthologized and anatomized, but occasional phrases […] or refrains […] that one finds hanging about one's mind like nursery rhymes, or folk poetry, long after one has put the book down in favour of Wallace Stevens.
>
> (Larkin 1983: 158)

The jokey reference to Stevens, presumably invoked here as a totem of complexity, implies that one looks to Smith for simpler, less taxing pleasures. How, then, does one account for 'The Ballet of the Twelve Dancing Princesses', a poem which, although it is imbued with the stuff of nursery tale and folklore which for Larkin diminished the seriousness, nonetheless has a 'full-scale four-square' effect requiring sustained anatomization? The fact that it is one of various Smith poems ripe for close reading yet hitherto overlooked, while extensive commentary has been applied numerous times to much briefer (and often to arguably trite) pieces, raises interesting questions about preferences and prejudices within the critical reception of her work to date. More specifically, the poem lends force to Muriel Spark's characteristically incisive suggestion that the 'half-hinted narrative pieces […] better represent Miss Smith's talent than the shorter verses'—a claim which has not yet been given the consideration it deserves in Smith studies (Spark 1991: 73) .

However, to make a case for ambiguity and obliquity as guarantors of poetic quality may itself be the consequence of implicit bias. It is worth bearing in mind Mark Storey's observation that, in Smith's poetry, 'the temptation to move towards greater abstruseness and

complexity is always there, and a number of poems can be seen to fail when they succumb in this way' as well as his suggestion that, in much of her work, 'one of Stevie Smith's most important qualities is her determination to persevere within the confines of simplicity' (Storey 1979: 43-4). This is a line of thinking furthered by Martin Pumphrey, who argues that the close inspection of 'isolated individual poems' is potentially

> misguided, not only because it seems to stem from an unacknowledged desire to defend the literary categories the poetry so obviously contests but, more crucially, because it reflects an attempt to pass Smith off as respectable. Such an approach must inevitably be self-defeating. […] To single out as important simply those poems that can be read most easily as 'serious literature' is to evade the critical challenge of Smith's full poetic performance.
>
> (Pumphrey 1986: 85-6).

The point is well made, and it usefully qualifies any attempt to present 'The Ballet of the Twelve Dancing Princesses' as indisputably representative of Smith at her finest; the range of her work is too vast and varied to allow for such a partisan claim. Nor is there an easy distinction to be drawn between the the artlessly winning and the artistically well-wrought—or 'between play and "seriousness"', as Pumphrey puts it (86). One of the most arresting qualities of Smith's strange meditation on the girls' ballet is that it seems at once to be highly 'literary' and drawn to the world of childish games and frivolity.

Pumphrey's suggestion that 'the uncompromising use of play and fantasy' is Smith's 'most distinctive characteristic' (85-6) and his emphasis on her favouring of 'the possibilities of fairy magic as an alternative to the reductive logic of conventional common sense' (91) have proved highly enabling in their repercussions. The contention in his 1986 article that Smith's poetry, through its knowing engagement with 'children's culture', is able 'to challenge conventional literary and cultural frames and unsettle the reader's assumptions about the relationship with the text' (87) anticipated the intensification of interest, from the

early 1990s onwards, in the 'subversive' (87) potential of Smith's work and the ways in which it might be said 'to contest cultural forms and assumptions' (87). There is a point of connection, for instance, with Sheryl Stevenson's enquiry into the polyvocal quality of Smith's writing, in which she considers how the 'serious' and the 'playful' merge (Stevenson 1992: 33)—as when 'archaic and archetypal […] fairy-tale' (37) qualities combine with other idioms and perspectives—and how the resulting 'ambivalence' of her register liberates Smith from being read 'in terms of one voice or view' (43). In the works of Romana Huk and Laura Severin that followed, the implications of this liberated voice were considered in the light of cultural politics, and the possibilities of reading Smith's work as expressive of a complex negotiation with received constructions of female identity were explored. For Severin, both the 'carnivalesque' manner in which Smith 'exuberantly mixes "high" and "low" art forms' (Severin 1997: 19) and the impulse to subject received narratives to 'radical retellings' (17) provide Smith with the means 'to challenge the unity and coherence of women's gender identity' (21). While it is hard to map Severin's ideological model of Smith's work as culturally radical and subversive to the kind of sustained close reading offered in the present article, it is certainly worth pondering the implicit gender politics of the experiences and impulses described in 'The Ballet of the Twelve Dancing Princesses', where 'children's play' is at once subject to the careful control of schooling and cultural moulding and, in its 'equivocal' qualities, resistant to any unitary reading of how the girls on the lawn think, feel or should be judged. The ambiguity in the poem as to where childish innocence ends and adult knowingness begins is a quality which Severin detects elsewhere in Smith's oeuvre: her reading of the 1947 short story 'Is There a Life Beyond the Gravy?' (Smith 1981: 60-73) shows Smith to be imaginatively drawn towards an 'alternative world', 'an irrational world, […] a world that is outside the boundaries of both childhood and adulthood' (Severin 1997: 113). The allure of such a liberated zone is registered repeatedly in Smith's work, and there

are certainly grounds for reading the free play that this creative space affords in terms of resistance to restrictive conceptions of female conduct and identity.

For Huk, too, the subversive cultural potential of Smith's writings has proved a source of fascination, and in her first article on Smith's 'shifty, polyvocal works' (Huk 1993: 241) she suggested that 'reconstructions of fairy tales' provided one means of generating 'problematized representations of, and negotiations with, the competing/collusive languages/voices that construct Smith's English selfhood and womanhood' (242). In an extension and complication of her initial thinking on this matter, and in a process of dialogue and contestation with Severin's critical approach, Huk's subsequent monograph sought to articulate how Smith's work in some respects absorbs and in others disrupts received discourses and 'covert ideologies struggling for dominance through language' (Huk 2005: 4). When it comes to the 'self-conscious […] retellings of fairy tales and other cultural stories' (13), Huk suggests that 'Smith's poems […] carry and miscarry the rhythms of inculcating forces—nursery rhymes, ballads and fairy tales, for example—as testimony to their lasting influence and to the power of familiar sounds to produce conditioned, unexamined responses' (25). Although the work that Huk has in mind here is the poetry Smith wrote in 'mock-fairytale mode' (285) in the 1950s and 1960s (such as 'The Frog Prince' (Smith 2015: 471-3), in which, as Huk puts it, Smith both channels 'the child-like rhythm, rhyme and diction of the fairytale genre' (Huk 2005: 286) and ironically blends it with other formal and linguistic effects), her critical perspective also has a suggestive applicability to the 1939 'Ballet' poem. On the one hand, the idea that the schoolgirls 'seem to be in a trance' may suggest their unconscious susceptibility to the cultural power of the folk story their dance enacts, with all the assumptions about gendered conduct and outlook that the story encodes: one could argue, in Huk's terms, that the legend represents the 'inculcating forces' that 'produce conditioned, unexamined responses' and that the girls dance in unwitting compliance to the culturally ordained tune. Furthermore, to the extent to which the poem itself is carried along both by its

attraction to the Grimm Brothers' story and by its own incantatory rhythms, it too could be said to be caught in the same spell. On the other hand, Smith's alert, self-conscious scrutiny both of the schoolgirls' activities and of her own mode of writing, with all its 'miscarried' rhythms, self-reflexive gestures and wry equivocations, might be taken as the expression of a culturally subversive and questioning stance.

My uncertainty as to how (or how far) to read 'The Ballet of the Twelve Dancing Princesses', and Smith's poetry more generally, in terms of a tacit articulation of gender politics (progressive or otherwise) only compounds the numerous other interpretative uncertainties expressed in this article. Huk, too, makes anxious self-interrogation a defining quality of her critical procedure. That such misgiving is (or ought to be) inescapable is central to the line of enquiry pursued in the most recently published monograph on Smith: with its claim that 'we initiate ourselves as Smith readers by accepting culpability, responsibility, and failure' (May 2010: 137), William May's *Stevie Smith and Authorship* provides a compelling account of the ways in which Smith's style of writing generates and anticipates misconstrual—almost as if the work is resistant to the very notion of being understood. As May puts it in his preface,

> for some, her *sui generis* idiosyncrasy makes her uniquely immune to academic treatment. Others point to her authorial shoulder-shrugs to ask whether she need be taken seriously at all. Her caricatures of professional literary readers in her poems and novels find them, without exception, to be pompous, self-regarding, and belittling to their subjects. If sustained study of her work is rewarding, its gifts are often given with sly looks and mistrust. (vi)

May's contention that 'Smith's […] own readers unwittingly feel the presence of the overlooking author when assessing her work' (17) instructively brings the issue of readerly discomfort to the fore of Smith studies, and his suggestion that her work 'undermines the act of reading itself, provoking a perpetual cycle of "misreadings"' (20), speaks to the hesitant

heart of the present article. On pondering ‘The Ballet of the Twelve Dancing Princesses’, it is hard to shake off the feeling that, like the schoolgirls on the lawn, one is subject to the secret surveillance of the poet who, in her cloak of invisibility, seems to be everywhere and nowhere at once—smiling, scowling, judging. If one takes the poem into a university seminar room in order to explore the sophisticated ways in which it is built on recessive layers of ambiguity, a paranoid projection of the poet, all ‘sly looks and mistrust’, hovers in the collective consciousness, mockingly reminding the assembled group that the unparaphrasable poem operates in the realm of the superstitious and the irreducibly irrational. The impossibility of distinguishing between strategically contrived and unconsciously achieved effects calls to mind Jan Montefiore’s proposal that ‘Smith’s overall success as a storyteller comes from the way she tells her often complicated tales without analysing their significance’ (Montefiore 1987: 49). Such analytical work falls to the critic, and yet the criticism will not be adequate to its task if it does not also attempt to account for the sense that Smith’s poetry seems to be braced against, and even to undermine, the very process of analysis.

Appendix: The Hayes Court Summer Ballet

Fig 1. Scene from an unidentified ballet

Fig 2: The ballet audience

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